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THE MODERN-POSITIVE MOVEMENT IN THEOLOGY¹

No more interesting movement has appeared in the realm of systematic theology in recent years than the attempt of several gifted scholars to find an acceptable *via media* between the extremes of theological contention. So long as theologians could be divided into two parties, one of which was characterized by strict adherence to the principle of authority and the other by a somewhat daring delight in new and untested hypotheses, wholesome progress was difficult. Too much energy must be spent in maintaining or in resisting the weight of authority. Exactly as modern natural science has inherited an antitheological bias, because in the past theologians have obstructed free investigation, so it has been difficult for the scientific movement in biblical and systematic theology to free itself from a polemic attitude toward ecclesiastical devotees. The appearance of this new movement in theology is an indication that in Protestantism the days of party warfare in theology are numbered. The Catholic church, with its ecclesiastical machinery, can prolong the warfare, to the lasting damage of both science and religion. Protestantism cannot follow the uncompromising course of the Roman church, for it has not the necessary ecclesiastical authority. And no more hopeful sign can be observed than this frank abandonment by conservative theologians of a mere formal appeal to authority.

Until recently, the so-called "modern-positive" movement has been most vigorous in Germany. Professor Reinhold Seeberg, the year after the delivery of Harnack's famous lectures on the Nature of Christianity, delivered a similar course, entitled "Die Grundwahrheiten der christlichen Religion." This series of lectures, after passing through four editions in Germany, has been translated in the "Crown Theological Library" series. Professor Seeberg further elaborated his theological ideals in *Die Kirche Deutschlands im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (1903), and in two volumes of essays and addresses, containing primarily theological studies,

¹ *The Fundamental Truths of the Christian Religion.* By Reinhold Seeberg. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908. xiv+331 pages. \$1.25 net.

Zur systematischen Theologie. Abhandlungen und Vorträge. Von Reinhold Seeberg. Leipzig: Deichert, 1909. vi+395 pages. M. 6.60.

Zur Beurteilung der modernen positiven Theologie. Von Martin Schian. Giessen: Töpelmann, 1907. 121 pages. M. 2.80.

Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind. By P. T. Forsythe. New York: Armstrong, 1907. 12+374 pages. \$1.75.

Offenbarung und Wunder. Von W. Herrmann. Giesen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1908. 71 pages. M. 1.40.

the second of which has just appeared. Theodor Kaftan, R. Grützmacher, and Karl Beth have also published systematic treatises dealing with the problem of preserving the "old faith" in a "new theology." A considerable literature has grown out of the movement in Germany.

In English-speaking countries, the same tendencies have been long felt, but have often found somewhat unmethodical and popular expression. The principles of the Ritschlian theology or the philosophical tenets of English Hegelianism have in the main been dominant in efforts at reconstruction. But these types of theology have been viewed with suspicion by both conservatives and liberals because they seemed to be too exclusively subjective either to do justice to the objective revelation which the conservative desires to retain or to the scientific method which is so real to most university men. The Lyman Beecher lectures of Principal Forsythe brought to America a vigorous presentation of the modern-positive ideal which had for two years been attracting attention in Germany. D. S. Cairns's *Christianity in the Modern World* about the same time gave a glimpse of a reconstructed Christianity which should not forsake the supernatural elements of the gospel, but which should also keep in touch with the modern movements of thought. And now we have the translation of Professor Seeberg's Berlin lectures in the widely influential series of the "Crown Theological Library." We may expect that under the stimulus of these publications, there will be a general recognition of the fact that the new age demands a new theology. The great question will be as to the nature of this new theology?²

² Of the books reviewed in this article, *The Fundamental Truths of the Christian Religion* is the translation in the "Crown Theological Library" of Seeberg's Berlin lectures of 1901. It is a most readable and engaging discussion of the elements of Christian belief in a spirit of honest inquiry, but with the retention of faith in a supernatural revelation. The brevity of treatment often leaves one in doubt as to just where Dr. Seeberg stands, but this doubt can be removed by other writings of the author. *Zur systematischen Theologie* is a collection of essays and addresses, some of which have previously been published in pamphlet form. Of especial interest are the following titles: "Die Moderne und die Prinzipien der Theologie," "Die Wahrheit des Christentums," "Der evangelische Glaube und die Tatsachen der Heilsgeschichte," and "Die kirchlich-soziale Idee und die Aufgaben der Theologie der Gegenwart." Schian has given an admirable survey and criticism of the modern-positive movement in a collection of essays, two of which had been previously published in periodicals. The title of the pamphlet, *Zur Beurteilung der modernen positiven Theologie*, indicates the nature of his critical investigations. He finds that the modern-positive school is genuinely interested in making Christianity intelligible to the modern world, but that its main sympathy is with the orthodox conception of supernatural redemption rather than with the inductive spirit of the modern world. Principal Forsythe's Lyman Beecher lectures treat the matter from the point of view of the preacher, but he attempts

What, then, so far as they can be gathered from these publications are the fundamental principles of the movement? The most important is the complete abandonment of that conception of biblical authority which has been dominant in historical Christianity. Seeberg distinctly calls this view an "error,"³ and rejoices that we are in a position to make a better use of the Bible than to cite proof-texts. Forsythe utters scathing criticisms of orthodoxy, which he calls "canned theology gone stale."⁴ The older effort to construct a system of theology from mere external authority is seen to be scholastic, and sterile. We must have a religious message which will seem real to men of the twentieth century. And this means that the right of actual experience to determine theological results is admitted. If a biblical doctrine has not the inherent power to compel from men a recognition of its truth, no appeal to authority can revivify it. The far-reaching consequences of this position are evident. It makes a place for that freedom which is the charter of modern scholarship, and it must in consequence make positive use of the well-established results of scholarship.

But the movement is also a protest against the presupposition which reigns in much scientific work of historical theology, that the abandonment of the methods of authority means also the abandonment of the ideal of the supernatural. The word "positive" is intended to mark off this type

to draw the contrast between the "positive" and the "liberal" preacher. For the positive preacher the gospel is a supernatural provision for the salvation of men; for the liberal it is a historical form of religion to be judged by human criticism. The book is written in the author's well-known epigrammatic style; and the effort often seems to be to find picturesque rhetorical contrasts rather than to investigate the subject under discussion. The following will illustrate the distinction which Dr. Forsythe draws between the two forms of theology: "The methods differ in their start, then. The one begins with man, the other with God; the one with science and sentiment, the other with the gospel; the one with the healthy heart and its satisfaction, the other with its ruined conscience and its redemption. The one begins with the world (as I say), the other with the Word" (p. 249). Herrmann's pamphlet contains a revised edition of his address on Revelation, published in 1887, and his address before the theological conference at Giessen in June, 1908, entitled, "*Der Christ und das Wunder*." It is of especial interest as showing his own attitude toward the position of Seeberg. While admitting that Seeberg is not far distant from him in the matter, both passing from the inner experience of redemption to a consequent reverent and expectant attitude toward the Bible, Herrmann feels that we must always make the certainty of experience primary, while Seeberg inclines to pass from this experience to a primary emphasis on the objective miraculous elements of redemption-history.

³ *The Fundamental Truths of the Christian Religion*, p. 108.

⁴ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 203.

of theology from the extreme liberalism which comes to "negative" conclusions concerning many of the central doctrines of Christianity. To use Kaftan's phrase, it is the "modern theology of the old faith" which is to be expounded. And this "old faith" is faith in a supernatural revelation and a supernatural redemption. As Forsythe puts it, "For the positive theologian the course of history has been chiefly determined by the due intervention of supernatural and incomparable factors" (p. 219). "The positivity of the gospel means the effectual primacy of the given" (p. 211). Hence criticism must not be allowed to eliminate all objectivity to the gospel. "Of course a modern positivity admits the reason as a critic of the Bible, of mere sacred history, but not of the holy gospel. The gospel which recreates our moral experience in the end criticizes us. We cannot judge our judge" (Forsythe, p. 219). The movement is thus in close sympathy with orthodoxy, in so far as the latter insists upon an external revelation as the basis for belief. Man would never have come to an adequate conception of God by the natural growth of experience. The thought of God must be "given to man from outside" (Seeberg, *Fundamental Truths*, p. 10). This positive objectivity of the gospel seems to save us from the necessity for beginning over again our theological task. The *Heilstatsachen* are already provided. Theology has only to expound their significance.

The all-important question is how we are to determine the objective content of the "gospel." Under the theory of biblical infallibility the problem was easily solved. But if we admit the right of critical scholarship how can we be sure what elements of the biblical narrative will survive the test? The representatives of the modern-positive movement generally follow the Ritschlian school in declaring that we cannot expect historical criticism to give us the gospel. Criticism can establish indubitably that the writers of the New Testament believed in a supernatural Christ who brought a supernatural redemption to men. "But these are not the prime questions. If they were, our faith would be at the mercy of the critics. The great question is, Did he (Christ) really do the things the apostles believed? Was he really what he held himself to be?" (Forsythe, p. 275) The answer to this question, as Forsythe declares, following Theodor Kaftan, must be "dogmatic." What is meant by this we must examine a little in detail.

No man can be absolutely free from presuppositions in dealing with the traditional beliefs of Christianity. He will be either predisposed to credit them or he will be prejudiced against them. Whether one takes a priori a favorable or an unfavorable attitude constitutes the "dogmatic" element in the decision. Now if because of one's religious experience one

has come to have a certainty of the presence of God in his life, it is easy to believe in the genuineness of the biblical accounts of the intervention of God in the events of the world. Seeberg, in his address, "Der evangelische Glaube und die Tatsachen der Heilsgeschichte," (*Zur systematischen Theologie*, pp. 127 ff) depicts the process, perhaps biographically, as follows:

I came into the presence of the traditions of the church. These seemed strange. They belonged to a past age. I found a protest arising within myself at the very thought of believing this supernatural account of things. Then something happened. The words which had been said to me were transformed into living power; their complexity was changed to simplicity. I did not bring this about myself, and no man was the cause of it. The will of God in his omnipotence penetrated into my heart. The complexity of tradition gained power and unity by becoming means for the activity of God (p. 140).

This inexplicable transformation Seeberg declares is a miracle. He has therefore experienced a miracle in his life; and it is no longer incredible that miracles should have occurred at other times in the history of the world. He can now read the Bible and the gospel with a confidence in its supernatural power. This confidence is constantly verified by his religious experience. Thus, the personal experience of a miracle is the prerequisite to the confident affirmation of the miraculous *Tatsachen* on which Christian theology must build. We may thus oppose a supernatural bias born of genuine experience to the antisupeanatural bias of negative criticism. Seeberg carries this principle so far that he can declare that miracles were limited to the biblical times because of the contemporary religious needs which are not paralleled in modern times.

Forsythe, in a similar way, affirms the possession of a superior standard of criticism due to religious experience.

The man, the church that is in living intercourse with the risen Christ, is in possession of a fact of experience as real as any mere historic fact, or any experience of reality, that the critic has to found on and make a standard. And with that experience a man is bound to approach the critical evidence of Christ's resurrection in a different frame of mind from the merely scientific man who has no such experience (p. 276).

On the basis of this present experience of the supernatural it becomes possible to affirm belief in the objective reality of the supernatural facts on which Christian redemption is founded. This does not necessarily carry with it the affirmation of the historicity of all the biblical narratives. It simply affirms the miraculousness of the redemption history contained in the Bible. This history culminates in Christ, who is the miraculous incarnation of divine power, and by virtue of whose work we may be redeemed.

Thus to Jesus Seeberg ascribes omnipotence, limited, indeed, by his human organism, but actually his. The real Jesus is to be found in the "God-will that guides the history of mankind." This God-will "fashioned the man Jesus as its organ and as the clear and definite expression of its being. . . . What He felt, willed, thought, said, and did, was worked in Him by the personal God-will that dwelt in Him." Although Seeberg constantly and powerfully depicts the moral achievement of Jesus, he nevertheless leaves us in some perplexity as to whether this achievement is the outcome of a real moral development, or whether it is a supernatural manifestation of virtue in human form. Could the man Jesus help working out the indwelling God-will? Was there any human will at all in the union of this God-will with the man miraculously created to be its "organ?" Can this supernaturalism be maintained without a more or less explicit docetism? On this point one cannot help feeling that Seeberg is constantly wavering between two different conceptions of salvation—between the orthodox Lutheran ideal of sacramental transformation and the Ritschlian ideal of inner awakening due to the moral power of the inner life of Jesus. Seeberg thus retains the objective metaphysical deity of Jesus, but at the expense of casting suspicion on the genuineness of the psychological experience of Jesus. Forsythe likewise insists that the deity of Christ, not his human moral achievement, is the foundation-stone of Christianity. But he finds the real center of Christianity pre-eminently in the cross. He demands that we shall preach a "real, objective and finished redemption."

The real acting person in the cross was God. Christ's death was not the sealing of a preacher's testimony; it altered from God's part the whole relation between God and man forever. It did not declare something, or prove something, it achieved something decisive for history, nay for eternity (p. 358).

The peculiarity of the movement is that it employs the Ritschlian method of determining theological doctrines by religious valuation, as a means of affirming historical "facts." It regards value-judgments as adequate to establish the objective existence of supernatural cosmic forces. Seeberg takes the content of traditional theology as a whole and affirms the truth of all which may receive positive religious value. Forsythe selects the cross as the central element. The positivist emphasizes certain "facts" or "deeds" or "truths" as elemental where Herrmann points to the inner life of the personality of Jesus. Thus, while the general content of the modern-positive theology is not so very far from that of the conservative Ritschlian, there is really a fundamental difference. This difference grows out of the fact that the ultimate realities to which the positivist appeals are historical and cosmic "facts," while the ultimate reality for the Ritschlian

is inner spiritual life. We may put the issue as follows: Does Christianity bring to us a mysterious transformation due to the transcendent supernatural efficacy of certain *Heilstatsachen*? Or does Christianity stimulate the inner spiritual apprehension of man so that he grows into psychological possession of the reality which Jesus embodied? Does Christianity mean that we have faith in Christ or that we share the faith of Christ?

The positivist would exalt religion by making it essentially the product of supernatural forces. Religion thus gives us something better than we could expect from the evolutionary process of the universe. God stoops down and lifts us up into another world. It is not enough to find a symbolic significance in the cross, by which its moral influence becomes potent. The cross "did not declare something—it achieved something." It is not sufficient to affirm the deity of Jesus as a valuation of his character. Jesus must be affirmed to possess divine omnipotence. In the *Heilstatsachen* is thus deposited an actual divine potency.

Now this is precisely what the Catholic affirms concerning the sacrament. It is not enough to make the sacrament a mere symbol. The Catholic would say that the sacrament "does not declare something—it achieves something." To reduce it to a symbol of the inner spiritual life seems to the Catholic to be cutting oneself off from the sure objective foundations of regeneration. No actual physical grace enters into man unless we can affirm the real presence of divinity in the sacrament. But Protestantism generally abandoned this realistic conception of the sacrament. To be sure this abandonment has been slowly accomplished. Both Luther and Calvin felt that to reduce the efficacy of the sacrament to a value-judgment would mean the elimination of its redemptive power. Christ must be physically or at least spiritually present in the bread and wine in order to justify men in a religious use of the sacrament.

But it is hard to see why the same process which has eliminated the belief in a "real presence" in the sacrament should not apply equally to the *Heilstatsachen* of the modern positivist. If, as Forsythe says, the cross makes it possible for God to forgive me as it would not have been possible if Christ had not died on the cross, have we not a counterpart of the Catholic doctrine of the localization of God's grace in a definite material event? Why should not Protestant theology do in this case exactly what it has done in the case of the sacrament? Why should not the cross become the symbol of a religious experience which comes not from a magical external cause, but from an actual sharing of the moral and religious devotion for which the cross stands? If it is a gain to put a universal human experience in the place of a peculiar magical efficacy in the case of the sacrament, why is it not also a gain in the doctrine of the atonement? The whole trend of

modern discussion points in the direction of just this change. "The cross on Calvary can never save thy soul; the cross in thine own heart alone can make thee whole."

And can we ultimately escape the same development of religious thought in the doctrine of the incarnation? Is it because of a divine "substance" or "nature" that Jesus is able to bring to man redemption? Is the metaphysical substance of the Chalcedonian Christ more divine than the moral achievement of Jesus of Nazareth? If it is desirable to substitute the spiritual value of the sacrament for the doctrine of transubstantiation, why is it not also better to find the real grandeur of Christ in that which directly commands our moral and religious adoration rather than in a mysterious substance which must be metaphysically defined in order to be pronounced divine?

It would seem, then, that the logic of the position of this interesting movement in theology must drive it to a deeper evaluation of the religious life, than is found in the present dependence on *Heilstatsachen*. Just as Luther insisted on retaining the belief in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, although the religious efficacy of the sacrament for him actually demanded no such guarantee, so the momentum of past realism in theology makes the transition to the religion of the spirit a slow process. We retain certain realistic supernatural elements in our theology long after we have outgrown the actual need for them. But confidence in Protestant circles is to be secured not by holding to a *few* redemptive facts in contrast to the *many* of strict orthodoxy. If salvation must come essentially by miracle, then the religion which can provide the most miracles is the best. Catholicism will prove itself far more satisfactory than "modern positivism" to those who hold this point of view. If, on the other hand, one comes to believe that God may be found in the normal process of events, that ordinary bread and wine with no magical qualities may be a genuine means of enabling the soul of man to find God, that the cross by its moral significance has power to summon men to moral transformation, that Jesus, by the glory of his spiritual achievement in human history brings the supreme revelation of God, then one abandons the attempt to find a supernatural metaphysical vocabulary to express something better than spiritual values. The modern-positive movement is significant in its willingness to pass from the position of external guarantees to one of trust in the voluntary affirmations of man in his spiritual struggles. When once confidence shall be placed here, theology will be no more disturbed by changes in its conclusions than is science at the revision of its hypotheses.

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